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ABSTRACT

Diverse low-cost, innovative, and successful state initiatives for school improvement have been developed over the last five years. Generated by public pressures for accountability, many states' increased capacity for policy analysis, and insights gained during 15 years of administering categorical grant programs, the initiatives include: programs for upgrading faculty; new curricula or curriculum guides; new school accreditation standards, requirements for state planning, and expanded state review of instructional programs; comprehensive school impovement plans; programs for sharing knowledge, problem solving skills, and technical assistance with schools and districts; testing strategies including state administered minimum competency tests; and new and improved parent involvement programs. Common characteristics of these efforts are a focus on the school as the unit of improvement, requirements for clear academic goals for improving basic skills, the use of longitudinal data for student evaluation and program modification, and state provision of technical assistance. (MJL)

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11. State Programs of School Improvement

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11. State Programs of School Improvement

The Issue

Improving education in a tight economy is likely to be one of the major challenges of the eighties. To meet that challenge, state education leaders already have developed a wide variety of low-cost, innovative, exciting and successful school improvement activities. This Issuegram highlights many of the state activities that the Education Commission of the States (ECS) discovered through a 50-state survey conducted in May and June of 1982.

What Are States Doing to Improve Education Quality?

States have developed nearly all the initiatives to improve education described in this Issuegram within the past five years. Diverse in substance, breadth and style, these initiatives include:

- An array of activities to improve the education work force, including new ways to certify or recertify teachers and administrators, teacher proficiency examinations, new professional development programs, and, in a number of states, new administrative training academies or institutes.

- Arkansas, for example, is training its principals in clinical observation skills in order to help them be better instructional leaders; this year, Arkansas also began training teachers in classroom management skills to increase time for instruction.

- A variety of new curricula or curricular guides, often focusing on the basic skills but also covering many other academic proficiencies.

  - Arizona, for example, has developed a list of essential skills in communication, computation and citizenship for all grades, and a list of teaching activities that leads towards student mastery of the skills.

- A range of new school accreditation standards, requirements for school planning, and expanded state review of instructional programs.

  - Both Colorado and Pennsylvania require an elaborate local district and school planning process as a condition of accreditation; one result has been the local development of many school improvement initiatives.

- Numerous comprehensive school improvement programs, nearly always requiring needs assessment, redesign of the instructional program, monitoring individual student performance, and modifying plans after evaluation.

  - Connecticut and Michigan are two of the leading states implementing comprehensive school improvement programs on a school-by-school basis. Both programs include specific attempts to implement the characteristics of effective schools.

- Many programs for sharing knowledge and helping schools or districts adopt new approaches, efforts to teach schools and districts how to solve problems on their own, and a wide array of new technical assistance services often provided through new or expanded regional education units.

  - Georgia has created 14 regional service centers to help local schools adopt or adapt specific programs; Tennessee reorganized its state department and created new regional technical assistance centers.

- A variety of strategies for testing students, including state-developed and -administered minimum competency tests; state-developed test items that can be used by

local districts for their own tests; and different requirements for using test results, e.g., for high school graduation or for modifying the instructional programs.

  - Thirty-eight states have minimum competency testing programs. Many of them have also added other activities designed to improve student performance.

- New and better parent involvement programs and, in some states, mandates to share information more widely with the community.

  - Massachusetts, North Dakota and Utah have programs that include active parent involvement, on the assumption (now supported by research) that parents can play many helpful roles in a school improvement program.

Individual State Approaches Vary

These new state activities aim to improve education in many different ways. The combination of strategies used, moreover, varies from state to state.

Some states have taken action in all or nearly all of the above seven areas:

- California has mandated new types of teacher certification and requires new teachers to pass a teacher proficiency test; has developed a number of new curriculum guides; mandates a local school planning process and conducts reviews of the local district instructional program; has for five years had a broadly based school improvement program; has implemented a dissemination/adoption assistance program; mandates locally developed minimum competency testing; and has strengthened requirements for parent and community involvement. Leadership initiative for these activities comes primarily from the state capital.

- Colorado and Connecticut also have a comprehensive program with activities in nearly all of the 7 areas mentioned above. But these states have a tradition of local control, so initiatives come mainly from local schools and local school districts.

- Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware also have broadly based and multi-faceted school improvement initiatives. All three have been leaders in implementing the many program possibilities suggested by the effective teaching and effective schools research.

Some states have limited activities to two or three intiatives.

- Oklahoma has raised teacher salaries, provided training for teachers and administrators, and developed new state curricular guides.

- Alaska has a school improvement program that provides inservice training for teachers and administrators, includes an effective schools project, dissemination/adoption assistance and a local project to build local capacity.

- Missouri has new accreditation standards, school planning requirements, a comprehensive school improvement program that draws on the effective teaching and effective school research, a dissemination adoption assistance program and a student competency test.

Other states have limited their school improvement efforts to one specific area:

- Arizona, New Mexico, Nebraska and South Carolina have focused almost entirely on testing -- of both teachers and students.

- Montana, South Dakota and Wyoming have focused on training teachers and administrators.

- Iowa and Illinois have used regional organizations to provide a range of technical assistance services.

- Mississippi, Texas and Virginia have focused on accreditation.

Reasons for State Initiatives

States have initiated school improvement policies for three primary reasons:

- Public pressures for accountability have grown with public perceptions of a decline in education quality. In the 1970s, all the states sought to improve student performance, at least in the basic skills, and 38 of them have required minimum competency testing of some sort. As the accountability issue matured, however, testing concerns often led to a variety of other concerns, including upgrading the education work force, strengthening the instructional program, expanding

community and parent involvement -- and initiating school improvements.

- The school finance reform movement of the seventies left many states with an improved capacity for policy analysis and an interest in finding out whether the new money was being used to buy services that would improve the quality of education.

- In 15 years of administering categorical grant programs, state education agencies and legislative research councils learned to look beyond the administrative and fiscal issues that surrounded the initial development of new education programs to issues of quality that emerged as programs matured. The knowledge gained through numerous program evaluations also led to the raising of education quality issues as legitimate issues in and of themselves.

General Characteristics of State Programs

Although specific state activities are diverse, many state programs have these four general characteristics:

- Focus on the school as the unit of education improvement. In most states, especially those with new education planning requirements, the school rather than the classroom or school district becomes the planning unit for school improvement. The faculty and principal work together to design and implement the school's program. This makes the principal a key to effective programs.

- Requirements to set clear academic goals for improving basic skills at the elementary level and to relate the instructional program directly to those goals.

- Collection of longitudinal data on students that is used for evaluating the progress of individual students and for modifying the instruction program.

- Provision of technical assistance from state education departments through a decentralized structure, usually through regional or intermediate service units. This is an attempt to bring the state education department closer to local school districts. Indeed, in many states, state department personnel work directly with individual schools: the school identifies problem areas and the state staff then facilitate school improvement activities by linking local needs to materials and programs used successfully by others working on the same problem.

Improvement of Secondary Schools Needed

Given the decline in higher-order skills, the increasing need for students to be better prepared in math and science, and rising public pressure for a stronger and more formal core curriculum, education reform at the high school level should increase as the 1980s progress. Although many high school studies are now being conducted (some of them initiated by the state), high school improvement programs are for the most part in the development state rather than the implementation stage.

Funding Problems Threaten Continuity

Cuts in federal aid and the poor fiscal health of most states threaten all state education improvement efforts. The administrative set-aside funds from state and federal categorical grant programs which were often used to begin improvement programs are now no longer available or are significantly reduced. Even though the costs of many state initiatives in school improvement have been relatively low, difficulties with overall funding for education make the fate of these initiatives uncertain.

What to Read

Odden, Allan and Van Dougherty, State Programs of School Improvement: A 50-State Survey. Denver, Colo.: Education Commission of the States, August 1982. $3.

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